

IASI JEWISH DEMOCRATIC COMMITTEE

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ABSTRACT

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY FROM IASI WAS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT COMMUNITIES IN ROMANIA. BETWEEN 1938-1941, THE JEWS WERE TARGETED BY DISCRIMINATORY RACIST LAWS, PROHIBITED FROM ACTIVITY IN SEVERAL ECONOMIC SECTORS, PART OF THEM WERE FIRED FROM ROMANIAN FIRMS, AND CATEGORIES OF JEWISH PROPERTIES AND BUSINESSES WERE IN THE PROCESS OF "ROMANIZATION". ALTHOUGH THE HEIGHT OF RACIST MEASURES AGAINST THE JEWS FROM IASI WAS AT THE END OF JUNE 1941, REPRESSION AND ANTI-SEMITIC LAWS CONTINUED UNTIL 1944. END OF THE WAR IN 1945 MEANT FOR ALL A PERIOD OF RECOVERY AND INTEGRATION, A TIME WHEN ANTI-SEMITIC LAWS WERE REMOVED. THE JEWS FROM IASI TRIED TO RETURN TO THE ORGANIZATION OF THE INTERWAR PERIOD. BUT MANY OF SOCIAL AND MEDICAL INSTITUTIONS WERE CONFISCATED OR CLOSED, THE ZIONIST ASSOCIATION WERE CONSIDERED DANGEROUS TO THE STATE. IN 1945 WAS CREATED JEWISH DEMOCRATIC COMMITTEE, "A JEWISH INSTITUTION FOR ALL JEWS". THE REAL PURPOSE OF JEWISH DEMOCRATIC COMMITTEE WAS TO CONTROL ALL THE JEWS, TO SECURE THE SUPPORT AND COLLABORATION. ONE OF MY MAIN GOALS OF THE STUDY WAS TO ANALYZE THE MAIN DOCUMENTS OF JEWISH DEMOCRATIC COMMITTEE, AND TO OBSERVE THE IMPACT AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS ORGANIZATION.

KEYWORDS: JEWISH; JEWISH DEMOCRATIC COMMITTEE; COMMUNISM; COLLABORATION;

Ever since an idea was formed to create a Jewish committee, there were lively discussions between the members of the different Jewish institutions. At the proposal of I. Schreiner Esq., General Secretary in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Mr. Dadu Rosenkrantz, an initiative committee is formed to establish the main directions of the Jewish Democratic Committee (J.D.C.) The short period of time allocated for discussions and consultations led to the emergence of doubts that such a committee would defend the interests of Jews. In the Initiative Committee's session dated June 7th, 1945 was populated with participants from the Communist Party, The Working Palestine Block and a part of U.E.P members, but the Jewish Party and the Zionist Organization were missing

¹. The main decisions taken in that session were: the editing of a proprietary gazette (the “Unirea” newspaper is published starting with November 1945, having the purpose of disseminating the committee’s ideas. Along the life of the J.D.C., the “Unirea” newspaper, not only published propaganda articles but was also used in a denigratory manner towards the principal Zionist and religious Jewish leaders as well as against the different institutions that did not correspond to the communist ideology) and to take control of the “Joint”².

The constitutive meeting of the J.D.C. took place on June 25th, 1945, with the participation of all Jewish organizations and main Jewish and religious leaders, who were enthusiastic due the displayed freedom of speech³.

The structure of the J.D.C. was similar to that of the Communist Party. The central leadership was formed of a board, executive bureau and a central bureau. There were four regional offices, within which local and county committees were active⁴. In Bucharest, each District had its committee. The Executive Bureau was active in several sections: The Organization Section, The Agitation and Propaganda Section, The Training Section, The Cultural Section, The Re-Stratification Section⁵.

The political makeup of the committee was mainly made up of communists, but also social-democrats, U.E.P. members, leftist Zionists, the Social-Democrat Zionist Party, Ikuf (press distribution organization). The civil servants came from the intellectual class with very few belonging to the “working” class. The first J.D.C. President was Mr. M. H. Maxy and each bureau had the responsibility to draft activity reports, to present accomplishments, etc⁶.

At the end of the first year in activity, the J.D.C. organized the first and only country wide conference (on June 25th, 1956), where the majority of Jewish leaders in

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¹ Laiş Slomo, Leibovici, *Comitetul Democratic Evreiesc- formaţiune politică evreiască sau jewsecţia românească*, Ed. Ion Prelipcean, 2003, 16-17.

² Ibidem, 17.

³ Hary, Culler, *Evreii în România anilor 1944-1949. Evenimente, documente, comentarii*, Ed. Hassefer, Bucuresti, 2002, 43

⁴ Laiş Slomo, Leibovici, op. cit, 22.

⁵ *Evreii în România Democrată- Prima conferinţă pe ţară a Comitetului Democrat Evreiesc*, Ed. Comitetului Democrat, 9

⁶ Ibidem, 12.

Romania were invited, with the guest of honor being Rabi Alexandru Şafran⁷. In order to mark the importance of the event, the conference edited a brochure presenting the section reports, debates, as well as the committee's new projects. In the later published brochure there were 17 resolutions in reference to the legislation of Jewish citizenship, return of properties and households confiscated before 1944 and the return of Jews deported to concentration camps. Two of the 17 resolutions are in reference to the Iasi Community and the condemnation of the people responsible for the 1941 Pogrom. Thus, Resolution VIII states: "*The problem of widows and orphans that resulted from the killing of thousands of Jews by the fascists during the Iasi Pogrom... in the legionary rebellion, in the massacres and internal turbulences of the terror years, left without support, has not been solved to this day...*"⁸ and Resolution XVII requested: "*the sanctioning of criminals, moral and material authors of the Iasi massacre, whose judgment must be carried out at the place of their crimes..*"⁹

Starting with the second year of activity, the J.D.C. leadership is changed, the new designated General Secretary being Mr. N. Goldhamer and the person responsible for Jewish problems in the Central Committee is Mr. Bercu Feldman¹⁰. From the beginning of the organization, the J.D.C. considers itself to be an organization for all the Jews, no matter their political, religious orientation and social status, promising that it will solve all the important issues (such as: *legislate the Jewish citizenship that was left at the same stage as during the racial oppression regime. – Resolution V*¹¹).

In reality, the institution only served the interests of the Communist Party, and once they captured all the power after the 1946 elections they started tougher and tougher actions against the Jewish leaders and institutions that did not align with communist requirements.

Before 1938, in Iasi, there existed one of the most developed and important Jewish communities of Romania, with rich economic, social and cultural activities. In Iasi there were many independent Jewish institutions and associations, such as the Israeli Hospital,

⁷ Ibidem,, 8.

⁸ Ibidem, 12.

⁹ Ibidem, 13.

¹⁰ Laiş, Slomo, Leibovici, op. cit, 33.

¹¹ Evreii în România Democrată - Prima conferință pe țară a Comitetului Democrat Evreiesc, Ed. Comitetului Democrat, 13.

the Ghelerter Childrens' Hospital, vocational schools (the Reunions of Israeli Women), soup kitchens and orphanages¹².

All these were closed starting with 1938, and the buildings were passed into the state's property. Once the war ended there was a desire to restart social activities due the high number of the impoverished population. Yet, the associations and institutions with heritage were no longer compatible with the new realities post 1945.

After the end of the war, Zionist associations militating immigration from Romania also started their activities through conferences and by editing their own newspapers, the establishment of vocational schools where the youth could learn trades to be practiced in Israel, orphanages and summer camps or farms¹³.

The intensification of the Zionist movement after the war, was due to several factors amongst which: the poor economic situation, the ascent of communists to power, the impossibility to practice part of the old vocations, lack of solutions in regard to the return of Jewish property and households, the terror of living under a new regime with evident anti-Semitic tendencies, the state's implication and control of community administration, religious, economic and private life, as well as the establishment of the State of Israel. For Iasi Jews, continuing to live in the city where the Pogrom took place represented a unique social context. The memory of the late June's 1941 events continues to retain painful reminders, constantly influencing the relationships between Christians and Jews. The idea of living in the same city as the murderers of their parents and children was hard to live with for a lot of people. Even though at the end of the war many trials were organized in Iasi, purposed to try and condemn the Pogrom's organizers, the punishment of the guilty has been partially applied and in many cases, the justice served was greatly disproportionate to the committed crimes. The Jews considered that many Romanians have not yet paid for their crimes. In 1948, at the end of the Pogrom Trial, 50 persons were convicted. Until the end of the 40s', the great majority of Iasi's community leaders chose to leave to Israel (Community President Avram Hahamu immigrated to Tel-Aviv in 1950, and the President of County Bureau and Community President in 1941, Mr. Iacob Iosef moved to Jerusalem)¹⁴.

¹² Ion, Mitican, *Evreii din Târgu Cucului de altădată. Câteva aduceri aminte*, Ed. Tehnopress, Iași, 2004, 85.

¹³ Șase ani de activitate în slujba educării evreiești a tineretului lui Israel, *Asociația Tineretului Sionist din România*, 23.

¹⁴ Yad Vashem Jerusalem Archive, Abraham Hahamu's Testimony.

The Hehaluț movement in Iasi, after 1945, was represented by Dror-Habonim and Hașomer-Hazoir, both training youngsters for agricultural activities that they will practice in Palestine (in Israel starting with 1948)¹⁵. Dror-Habonim had 15 members and Hașomer-Hazoir 32¹⁶ (a relatively low number taking into account that in postwar Iasi there were 38000 Jews i¹⁷,-, while before 1938 the number of youngsters implicated in the Zionist movement's social and cultural activities was much higher. Thus, between 1924-1940 a Hehalut farm ¹⁸ was functional in Iasi and in 1925 the Hașmonea college student movement was established, the young students actively implicating themselves in organizing conferences and other activities Zionistic in nature. (The Zionist Youth Association was another Iasi Zionist organization of the interbellum period, where Menachem Mendelshon activated during his college years, the Community President of the Cultural and Social Assistance Section. He was also active during the Antonescu regime in the Machtebeth-Resistance)¹⁹.

A possible explanation for the reduced number of youngsters enrolled in the post 1945 Zionist organizations, as presented in official reports, might be represented by the implication of the authorities in the denigration and condemnation of the Zionist movement. Even though the economic crisis after the war affected everyone, the persons declared to be Zionists, thus „dangerous elements” for the state, were not allowed to work, were followed, investigated and condemned²⁰.

As such, many Jews preferred to illegally immigrate as soon as possible without attracting the authority's attention.

In one of its numerous reports, the Joint Distribution Committee made certain observations that captured the Jews' critical situation in post 1945 Romania: *“The general situation in Romania is very poor. The impoverished economic situation of the country made many Jews sell everything, even their shoes in order to buy foodstuffs for day to day living. The ones classified as Zionists were not allowed to work. The foodstuffs can only be bought off the black market. Day after day, thousands of Jews take the Israeli Consulate by*

¹⁵ Hachalutz, the movement of the Roumanian Zionist Labour Youth, Financial department, Statistical report, august-december 1947, 15.

¹⁶ Ibidem, 17.

¹⁷ Gheršhom David Hunderst , The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, Volume I, Yale Univeristy Press, 2008, 796.

¹⁸ Ibidem, 797.

¹⁹ Archive Jerusalem Yad Vașhem, Menachem Mendelshon's Testimony.

²⁰ Adevărata înfățișare a „Raiului Sionist” din Statul Israel, cuvântul unor oameni ai muncii evrei către populația muncitoare, 1950, 31.

*assault, asking for help and the possibility to immigrate to Israel.*²¹ The A.J.D.C. also financed the operations of Iasi orphanages, such as the orphanage under the patronage of the Haşomer-Haţoir Zionist Association, enrolling 73 children in 1946 (pg. 32)²².

Due the fact that the J.D.C. declares itself against immigration, the Zionist movement is aggressively attacked, first in the press and in conferences, later to be continued with threats and direct confrontations between the two parties. Time and time again, the Zionist leaders as well as simple members are arrested and accused to be fascists and imperialists. Even though the Romanian state had an ambivalent attitude towards the immigration of Jews to Israel, (*Until 1948 when Israel proclaimed its independence, the immigration of Romanian Jews was accepted and allowed by the authorities. The end of the 40s, which coincided with the beginning of the Cold War led to harsher immigration policies. Despite this, a massive immigration wave of mosaic rite citizens took place during 1948-1958 (120 000 persons). The attitude of Romanian leaders was contradictory, from encouraging, to organizing, to totally forbidding the immigration.*²³), the J.D.C. strongly condemned the Zionist movement²⁴. After the dismemberment of all Zionist associations, the J.D.C. took over the organization of the Alia. Under the leadership of the J.D.C. 8000 requests were approved, but no more than 3700 persons left the country. Amongst these were many elderly, orphans and sick persons, people that were allowed to pay for approval, as well as Jewish communists or persons considered to be dangerous²⁵.

Amongst the measures meant to assure its popularity with the Iasi Jews, the J.D.C. in Iasi drafted files with the widows and orphans that survived the Iasi Pogrom. The files were consulted by persons responsible with the verification of victims and injured. These recommended the approved files for survivor pensions. Following this action, thousands of files were forwarded to the Iasi J.D.C. headquarters. The persons responsible with the verification of the victims were well known lawyers and civil servants, amongst which I. Kaufman Esq., Mendel Avram, Alexander Blumenthal, Iosub Orenştein, Zelingher Aron, Moses Aron, N. M. Barul²⁶.

²¹ Joint Distribution Committee Archives: D. Joint Archives Orphans.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Mihnea, Berindei, Dorin, Dobrinu, Grosu, Armand, ed., Bucuresti, Comisia prezidenţială pentru analiza dictaturii comuniste din România, Istoria comunismului din România. Documente – Perioada Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej (1945-1965), Ed. Humanitas, 2009, 78.

²⁴ Oamenii muncii evrei demască Sionismul, Editura de Stat, 1950.

²⁵ Carol, Bines, Din istoria imigrarilor in Israel, 1882-1995, Ed. Hassefer, Bucuresti, 1998, 112.

²⁶ Arhivele Nationale ale Romaniei, Directia Judeteana Iasi, Fond: Comitetul Democratic Evreiesc.

Another action meant to bring popularity with the Jews (especially Yiddish speaking Jews living in Moldova and Maramureș – the I.L. Pertz Club, starting in the interbellum period²⁷) was the imposition of Yiddish as mother tongue in disfavor of Hebrew. Thus, on March 6th, 1949, a Yiddish language Elementary School is opened in Iasi (similar schools teaching in Yiddish are also opened in Bucharest and Timișoara)²⁸.

The Iasi J.D.C. projects and programs followed the structure of the central J.D.C. By means of all the sections it spread propaganda in the party's interest wanting to "mobilize the Jewish masses in all activities of the Romanian Workers Party and mass organizations". Iasi J.D.C.²⁹. The weekly reports issued by the J.D.C. reveal that an intense and varied activity was carried out in Iasi, the Committee taking over all aspects of community life. The Iasi J.D.C. organized conferences, meetings, public debates where the Jewish population had to participate. The main topics being discussed at the public meetings were about the friendship of the Romanian peoples and the U.S.S.R., about bourgeois and proletarian morals and the "Unirea" was read in public³⁰. In a speech held in 1949, they emphasized the wonderful achievements of the Communist Party and the J.D.C.: *"For the first time we have legislation against racist crimes, individuals that committed crimes and thefts against Jews have been tried and found guilty, ... we received the right to study in Yiddish, we have a state theater, 5 deputies in the National General Assembly"*³¹. In one of the 1946 reports, the cleansing of the Ikuf library was decided, along with the replacement of the inadequate titles with materials appropriate for the respective period³².

People responsible with the mobilization of the Jewish working class were sent to each neighborhood.

Starting with 1946, the Iasi J.D.C. Study and Documentation Sub-section, led by Dr. Aizicovici, organized night school courses where committee approved lecturers taught classes indicated by the Central Committee.

Amongst the responsibilities of the J.D.C. members was the identification of persons thought to be reactionary and against the Party or the J.D.C. (most of the Jews

²⁷ Ion, Mitican, op. cit., 74.

²⁸ C.N.S.A.S, D. 8741, Problema evreiască, 1948-1950.

²⁹ Arhivele Nationale ale României, Direcția Județeană Iași, Fond: C.D.E..J., Dosar 7, f.7.

³⁰ Arhivele Nationale ale României, Direcția Județeană Iași, Fond: C.D.E..J., Dosar 11, f.23.

³¹ Arhivele Nationale ale României, Direcția Județeană Iași, Fond: C.D.E..J., Dosar 9, f.3.

³² Arhivele Nationale ale României, Direcția Județeană Iași, Fond: C.D.E..J., Dosar 5, f.11

considered to be dangerous or imperialists, being the Zionists³³). In an Iasi J.D.C report, the objective of tracking and supervision of local Zionist leaders was set, including the unmasking of the working class enemies: *“In our country, the Jewish bourgeoisie, used Zionist nationalism in order to break apart the Jewish working masses, away from the common fight of the Romanian and cohabiting national working masses against capitalist exploitation. Zionism has sought and seeks to sow distrust in the democratic forces of our country, transforming the masses into maneuverable instruments in the hands of the imperialists.* ³⁴.

Despite their “achievements”, of removing the Zionist enemy, the numerous and varied activities, the J.D.C. was not able to gain popularity amongst the Jews. The elimination or overtaking of different cultural, social, political, ideological and religious institutions that were part of the community’s life, the imposition of a new system that had nothing to do with the Jewish type of organization, the attempts to secularize the Jewish society, but also the removal of the Zionists in an aggressive manner, and their open opposition to the Alia, made most Jews believe the J.D.C. to only be a communist propaganda instrument rather than an institution that defends their interests. After the J.D.C. was dismembered in 1953, the exacerbated nationalism of the authorities was manifested by transforming the Yiddish schools into Romanian schools, the Jewish theater was closed and a part of the actors were arrested being accused of being Zionists, the Târgul Cucului Synagogue was taken off the list of historical monuments³⁵. In all the years of the J.D.C.’s existence and after its dissolution in 1953, Jews sought to immigrate to Israel. As such, Iasi only had 4 synagogues and 3000 Jewish inhabitants in 1975³⁶.

³³ C.N.S.A.S., D. 152, Problema evreiască, 1947, f.71

³⁴ Arhivele Nationale ale României, Directia Judeteana Iasi, Fond: C.D.E..J., Dosar 9, f.3

³⁵ Gherstom, David, Hunderst, The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, Volume I, Yale University Press, 2008, 797.

³⁶ Ibidem.

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